

Data costs and online access high on list of obstacles to online learning from South African students

By [Philiile Mabolloane](#), issued by [Juta and Company](#)

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More than half of the participants of a survey who reported that their student experience had become worse, said online learning was significantly less effective than in-person teaching because of limited online resources and the software used for lecturing.

At the end of July 2021, Juta announced the [results of its survey](#) in which it polled hundreds of students at public universities across South Africa. The results paint a bleak picture of the state of our students' wellbeing during the pandemic and demand urgent action from stakeholders in higher education. Perhaps more fundamentally, however, they make an important point about how we as a society make decisions.

As someone who started her career as a chemist before making the transition into the business world, I have always had an appreciation for the importance of evidence-based decision making that is grounded in good data.

All too often, businesses and the government rely on intuition and habit as their primary reasons for decision making, without even realising it. This is especially the case in South Africa where a divided and politically volatile public conversation makes the "public mood" loom large in our imaginations. We sometimes say things, and make decisions, based on what we're expected to say and do, not because there is good evidence for our choices.

What do the data say about the state of higher education in South Africa? In June, Minister Blade Nzimande released the [Advisory and Statements 2021/PSET Youth survey presentation_April 2021.pdf findings of a study](#) on the social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on post-school students. The study surveyed more than 13,000 students at universities and TVET colleges across the country. Its findings included:

- More than 40% of students were unable to buy their own food during lockdown, 10% of whom relied on donations and 15% went hungry on some days;
- Only 38% of students at TVET colleges had access to online learning facilities;
- Half of students reported difficulty communicating with their institutions during lockdown, with more difficulty reported among TVET students; and
- Almost a third of students who had access to online resources had no suitable place to study during lockdown.

While the department's survey helpfully collected data about the socioeconomic effects of the lockdown, it was surprisingly limited in its scope when it came to its educational effects. Juta's 2021 Survey of South African Students aimed to plug this data gap.

The vast majority (more than 99%) of respondents to the Juta survey — which focused on universities alone — had learnt either exclusively online since the pandemic started or with a hybrid online/in-person model. Experiences of online learning varied greatly, with 33% of respondents reporting their student experience as better, compared with 40% who reported theirs as worse. The remainder were unsure.

The Juta survey revealed that the quality and effectiveness of online teaching resources was a significant issue for our university students. More than half who reported that their student experience had become worse said online learning is significantly less effective than in-person teaching because of limitations on the online resources available to students and the software used to facilitate lecturing.

More concerning, however, was the number of students struggling to access online content at all — 32% said they

struggled to access online course content due to not having constant access to a computer or the internet. Staggeringly, nearly a quarter (23%) cited high data costs as a prohibitive factor.

Also alarming were the negative trends revealed in students' personal wellbeing. A startling 55% of all students who Juta surveyed reported struggling with mental health issues such as extreme stress, anxiety and depression since lockdown began; 33% said they felt lonely and isolated; and 25% were dealing with conflict at home because of struggling to find a quiet space to study.

With South Africa's slow vaccine roll-out and the high likelihood of a fourth wave, it appears online and hybrid learning will be a feature of higher education in the country for the foreseeable future.

Looking at the data, three clear priorities emerge which demand attention and action by stakeholders in the higher education sector.

First, there is an urgent need for investment in quality online teaching and learning resources that aid, rather than frustrate, learning. While Juta has risen to meet this challenge head-on with a series of highly accessible multimedia online textbooks — a first in the South African market — it is not enough that only publishers recognise this need. We need all role players in the higher education value chain to prioritise interactive, quality and accessible digital content and support.

Second, reliable internet access is fast becoming a key socioeconomic rights challenge that demands attention from policymakers. Increasingly, those without reliable access to the internet (in addition to more basic things such as water, electricity and housing) face being forgotten and unable to lift themselves out of poverty.

Finally, there is a mental wellbeing crisis among students that did not just start during the pandemic. For more than a decade, rates of mental illness among young people have been increasing, especially in the West. Suggested reasons for this include cultural trends brought on by increased connectivity, smartphone and internet dependency and social media addiction.

While we know that many South Africans are struggling with connectivity, it is possible that those who are plugged in may be falling prey to problematic internet habits that reduce resiliency. More importantly, in South Africa, the issue is likely to be compounded by what seems to be an increasingly hopeless economic reality for young people.

It is clear that more and targeted energy needs to be devoted to ensuring that evidence drives policy choices in higher education if we are to overcome the challenges of our reality.

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Phillie Mabolloane is the chief revenue officer at Juta.

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